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Inside the Department of Dirty Tricks

by Thomas Powers

"We're not in the Boy Scouts," Richard Helms was fond of saying when he ran the Central Intelligence Agency. He was correct, of course. Boy Scouts do not ordinarily bribe foreign politicians, invade other countries with secret armies, spread lies, conduct medical experiments, build stocks of poison, pass machine guns to people who plan to turn them on their leaders, or plot to kill men such as Lumumba or Castro or others who displeased Washington. The CIA did these things, and more, over a long span of years. On whose orders? This is a question a Pulitzer prizewinning writer addresses in an adaptation from his forthcoming book about Helms and the Agency, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*.

1. An Isolated Man

Richard Helms, as lean as a long-distance runner and looking just about as restless, dressed in a suit and tie, greeted a visitor at nine o'clock on a sunny morning on his front doorstep. He would not have been dressed any differently if he'd been on his way to present an annual report to the board of directors, but in the spring of 1977 he was not going anywhere. The reason was not that he was looking forward to a chance at last to read the collected novels of Balzac, or that he wanted to stay home to work on his stamp collection, or that he welcomed the freedom to watch a whole season of baseball on television. The reason was that his whole life was hanging fire while he waited to learn if a special grand jury would vote to indict him for certain acts committed shortly after he ceased to be director of central intelligence.

Indicted *for what?* Helms would ask in his own defense. Helms is a man with an oddly appealing grin. His lower jaw juts out a trace, giving his otherwise ordinarily handsome face a singularity. His grin, lower jaw out, eyes wide, hands up, has about it an ironic, incredulous air; he can be amused, bewildered, and angry at the same time. *For what?*

He knew perfectly well for what, but intended to convey his contention that he had never done anything he was not asked, ordered, expected, or required to do by the nature of his job. In particular, the director of central intelligence had a responsibility not to answer every idle question put to him. He was charged under the National Security Act of 1947 with protection of the CIA's sources and methods. No one has ever spelled out what powers are thereby granted to the DCI. Helms had to protect the CIA's secrets by himself. It was his job and he did it. Indicted *for what?*

The narrow answer was for perjury before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 7.